

CHRIST IN OUR HOME

Light for Today



October, November, December 2004

On the Cover

As we move through the final days of the season after Pentecost, we heed Jesus' call to follow in faith now. Arriving in Advent, we listen for God's voice and the promise of new life yet to come. At all times, God's word sustains us in our now-and-not-yet journey.

The gospel does not merely teach the story and accounts of Christ, but personalizes them and gives them to all who believe in it.

—*Luther's Works*, vol. 52, p. 20

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October, November, December 2004

Volume 51, Number 4

Rebecca Grothe, Gloria E. Bengtson,
and James Satter, editors

The Scripture readings for this quarter follow the Revised Common Lectionary, Series C. In addition, texts specific to commemorations and festivals are used when appropriate. For more information about the commemorations included in these devotions, see *Festivals and Commemorations* by P. Pfatteicher, or *Sundays and Seasons: Worship Planning Guide*. Both are available through Augsburg Fortress; 1-800-328-4648.

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Festivals and Commemorations

Bold type indicates a lesser festival. Plain type indicates a commemoration.

Date	Festival/Commemoration
October 4	Francis of Assisi, renewer of the Church, 1226; Theodor Fliedner, renewer of society, 1864
October 6	William Tyndale, translator, martyr, 1536
October 7	Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, missionary to America, 1787
October 17	Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, martyr, c. 115
October 18	St. Luke, Evangelist
October 23	James of Jerusalem, martyr
October 26	Philipp Nicolai, 1608; Johann Heermann, 1647; Paul Gerhardt, 1676; hymnwriters
October 28	St. Simon and St. Jude, Apostles
October 31	Reformation Day
November 1	All Saints Day
November 7	John Christian Frederick Heyer, missionary to India, 1873
November 10	Martin Luther, born, 1483
November 11	Martin, Bishop of Tours, 397; Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, teacher, theologian, 1855
November 17	Elizabeth of Thuringia, Princess of Hungary, 1231
November 23	Clement, Bishop of Rome, c. 100
November 25	Isaac Watts, hymnwriter, 1748
November 30	St. Andrew, Apostle
December 3	Francis Xavier, missionary to Asia, 1552
December 6	Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342
December 7	Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397
December 11	Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, missionary to India, 1910
December 14	John of the Cross, Prior at Segovia, 1591; Teresa of Avila, Carmelite, 1582; renewers of the Church
December 21	St. Thomas, Apostle
December 26	St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr
December 27	St. John, Apostle and Evangelist
December 28	The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

Hard times faith

The righteous live by their faith. (2:4)

Habakkuk, a contemporary of Jeremiah, lived in hard times. Babylon was threatening Judah, and God didn't seem to be doing anything about it. Habakkuk asked God to address the problem, then waited at his watch post, as each hour of waiting seemed to last as long as a day. Finally, God spoke. God told Habakkuk that to get through hard times, faith is required. That's not what Habakkuk wanted to hear, but it is what God offered.

When we have problems, we often wish God would ride in on a champion horse and slay our difficulties with a mighty sword. "Take away our problems," we plead with God. But removing our problems is not always best for us. When we have a path with no problems, it probably leads nowhere. Problems can bring us opportunities to do and be our best. Most of all, problems call forth faith in God, who walks with us on all our bumpy roads. Solving problems is not as important as trusting God in the midst of them. Faith during hard times makes us aware of God's presence. It is then that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

**Dear God, thank you for
being here when I need you most. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who hear bad news
from a doctor

From good stock

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. (v. 5)

First there was Lois, then there was Eunice, and then there was Timothy. The grandmother and mother who came before Paul's young protégé built him a spiritual foundation on which to stand for Christ. Their faith hoisted him up on their shoulders, from where he could see the possibility of his ministry and the promise of God's power. Timothy, whose name means "to honor God," had a solid heritage. He came from good stock.

I was born on Wednesday, taken to church the following Sunday, and have been there ever since. I was baptized at age seven, professed my faith in Jesus Christ at 15, and answered the call to ministry at 19.

While growing up, I went to church Sunday morning and evening, and attended prayer meetings on Wednesday nights. All the time, Mom was in the wings urging me on. When I was 13, she had a new house built, choosing the location because it was only 132 steps from the church. Mom did everything she could to keep me close to the Lord, where I've been for more than six decades. My mother gave me the greatest of legacies. I come from good stock.

**Thank you, God, for giving
me love, faith, and purpose. Amen**

Prayer concern: Children awaiting adoption

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**When you have done all that you were ordered to do,
say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only
what we ought to have done!" (v. 10)**

This verse tells us not to get a "big head" when we serve God. Serving God is what we should do when we love God. When we provide for our children because we love them, we don't expect people to pin blue ribbons on us. When we serve God, we are just doing our duty—we shouldn't expect to find our names on an honor roll somewhere.

Duty to God is not optional. It is not something we select from a list of possible responses to God's relationship with us. It is the only response. Forget about likes and dislikes; they are of no consequence. Forget about feeling or not feeling like serving; just do what must be done.

There's a story about a careless letter carrier who decided to save some of the mail for a light day. The light day never came, and eventually the supervisor found more than 10,000 pieces of mail in the letter carrier's possession. Think of the problems that would have caused. We are called to deliver every day for God. Let's deliver what we are supposed to deliver.

**Dear God, show me what I ought
to do for you and help me do it. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who depend on food pantries

Only one God

**Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder
with a voice like his? (v. 9)**

Job never got an answer to his question about why bad things happen to good people. Instead, he got a lecture from God about who God is and who Job was not. In the process, Job was told he wasn't qualified to be God.

Only God is qualified to be God. No one else fills the job description. No one else's résumé has enough accomplishments and awards to get the position. In fact, no one else need apply. The job's taken.

God is God alone—the ultimate source. God minus the world equals God, but the world minus God equals nothing. God is everywhere—wherever we are, God is. God is forever faithful. We don't so much hold on to God as God holds on to us. Voltaire noted that to whatever side we turn, we are forced to acknowledge our ignorance and the boundless power of God.

Upon returning from Sunday school, six-year-old Gene said, "Jesus is great." His mother was pleased about such a statement, but Gene was not through with superlatives. "I can tell you who is greater."

Mystified, Gene's mother asked, "Who?"

Gene replied, "His dad, that's who."

Thank you for being God. You are the greatest. Amen

Prayer concern: Children who don't go to Sunday school

Know who you are

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord? (41:1)

God continues to teach Job a lesson on humility. To be humble doesn't mean to belittle oneself; it simply means to keep oneself in perspective. In the early days of his pontificate, John XXIII saw himself in a full-length mirror and said, "O my, this pope's going to be a disaster on television." That's perspective.

Feeling humility can be an acknowledgment of God's greatness. Holding God in perspective makes it easier for us to hold ourselves in perspective. At night, we can search for the brightest star, but when the sun comes out, we see which star truly is the brightest.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer suffered imprisonment and faced death, he did so humbly—because he was a child before God. It isn't possible to be on one's knees and on one's high horse at the same time. Humility comes from acknowledging the grandeur of God.

A seven-year-old was sitting in his grandfather's car and listening to a radio weather forecast. There had been a false forecast for snow that day. The boy said, "I think God didn't send us snow today to remind people they don't know as much as God does!"

**Dear God, save me from pride and
strengthen my spirit to bow before you. Amen**

Prayer concern: All kinds of celebrities

Up close and personal

**I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you. (v. 5)**

A basic assumption of Hebrew religion has always been that God speaks to God's people. God spoke to Adam and Eve in the garden. God spoke to Moses on the mountain, David on the battlefield, and Solomon in the temple. Almost every book of the Old Testament includes the phrase "And God said ..."

When God spoke to Job, it was in such an intimate voice that Job said he felt God's presence—felt it so up close and personal that nothing he or his friends had said remained. Only God stood there. The supreme presence of God in our lives is what the book of Job is about. It says that all we really need to know in any circumstance is that God is with us.

A Sunday school class was studying personalities of the Bible, and the teacher asked who the children would like to be. One child said, "King David." Another said, "Paul." Yet another said, "Ruth." Then a girl in the corner of the room said, "I would like to be Lo." The teacher looked puzzled, so the girl explained, "You know, Jesus said, 'Lo, I am with you always.'"

**Dear God, I know that when I have you in
my heart, I carry heaven with me wherever I go. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those grieving the death of a spouse

What makes you wise?

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. (v. 10)

Information is not the same thing as wisdom. Wisdom does not necessarily come from learning new facts or getting more education. If it did, we would be a lot wiser than we are. In *The Rock*, poet T. S. Eliot wrote, "All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance. Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?"

Wisdom comes from experience—to be old and wise, you first have to be young and stupid. Wisdom comes from risk—we begin cutting our wisdom teeth when we bite off more than we can chew. Wisdom comes from questioning—the fool wonders, but the wise person asks. Wisdom comes from looking ahead. Wisdom comes from doing our part—one who is wise knows the difference between pulling one's weight and throwing it around.

Above all, wisdom comes from God. The psalmist says wisdom comes from "the fear of the LORD." Our wisdom comes from standing in awe before God. It comes from knowing who God is. When we trust who God is, then we can begin to know what God wants. That is wisdom.

**Dear God, keep me close enough
to you to hear what you say to me. Amen**
Prayer concern: High school seniors

Sometimes it's simple

Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? (v. 13)

Elisha instructed Naaman to wash in the Jordan River to heal his leprosy. Naaman resisted this prescription at first, wanting a more complex formula for healing. It's as if Naaman said, "The rivers back home make the Jordan look like a creek so, come on, give me something grand to do. I can't get well from such a paltry remedy." But he could, and he did.

Sometimes we think that we must be ministered to in fancy ways to receive what God desires for us. We may question if small rural churches with lay pastors and just a few members can do anything spiritual for us. We wonder if we need megachurches and television preachers and best-selling books to connect with God.

We are often wrong about God. God is God. That means God can choose any means to bless us. The Lord often uses the small to produce the spectacular. God receives minor input and delivers major output. The Lord takes small beginnings and makes out of them large blessings. God uses Peter to start a church. God picks up a couple pieces of wood, crosses them together, and saves our souls. Our God is able.

**Dear God, lead me to a greater
awareness of your mighty abilities. Amen**
Prayer concern: Members of small churches

Try to please

**Do your best to present yourself to God as
one approved by him. (v. 15)**

What makes God happy about what we do? Do our actions put a smile on God's face? Does God say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

Paul tells Timothy to work hard to please God. Timothy is not to give God what's left over from other endeavors; he is to give God his best. When the day is done, Paul wants Timothy to be able to hold his head high because of his service to God and God's people.

I love the Elisha story in which he mysteriously appears in the Edomite wilderness and is identified as the one "who poured water on the hands of Elijah" (2 Kings 3:11). Elisha traveled a long way under adverse conditions to be a servant on that occasion because he wanted to please God.

It is said that Saint Anthony gained renown not for his writings, nor his worldly wisdom, but solely for his service to God. When Patriarch John of Constantinople insisted that Pope Gregory address him as the "universal patriarch," the pope said he wanted to be known only as *servus servorum Dei* (servant of God).

**Dear God, help me to remember
that to do well I must do good. Amen**
Prayer concern: School bus drivers

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**Then one of them ... turned back, praising God
with a loud voice. (v. 15)**

One out of 10 is not a good statistic in the thanksgiving department, but let's put the nine who did not return to give thanks out of mind for a while. Let's concentrate on the one who hurried to Jesus and fell face down on the ground in sheer gratitude. He is our hero because there's nothing better than a grateful heart.

The most important prayer has just two words: "Thank you." In the midst of our blessings, let us not forget the One who has blessed us. The most complete prayer we can make is a grateful heart to God. In fact, a grateful thought toward God is itself a prayer.

John A. Mackay, noted writer and preacher, said that as a youth in the highlands of Scotland he accepted Christ as his savior. Mackay claimed that the rest of his life was simply a postscript to that moment that said, "Thank you, Lord, for what you did for me." Gratitude is born in our hearts when we take time to count up past blessings.

In his closing speech in Molière's *Tartuffe*, Orgon says, "Let us go at once and, gladly kneeling, express the gratitude all are feeling."

**Dear God, may I count my blessings instead
of my crosses, my gains instead of my losses. Amen**

Prayer concern: Foster parents

A side-by-side ally

The Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." (vv. 9-10)

It was not easy for Paul to preach in Corinth, a city filled with hedonists and libertines. When a Corinthian was depicted on the stage in a play, that character was portrayed as a drunk. Also, the city of Corinth had the temple of Aphrodite, which had sacred prostitutes. Each evening they came down from the Acropolis and practiced their trade on the streets of Corinth. It was in this city that God told Paul to relax and be cool-headed: "Speak the full truth and I will take care of the rest. You don't have to compromise the gospel because I am with you."

When we are in God's presence, we are in a big place because God's presence means God's power. Did you ever buy a toy that moves by itself because it is powered by batteries? Did you get it home and assume it was ready to go, only to read the small print, "Batteries not included"? When we follow God, we have everything we need.

**Thank you, God, that even in
my weakest hour you are my power. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those traveling alone

Walking the high way

[Apollos] had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus. (v. 25)

Regardless of what Apollos may not have known, he was headed in the right direction. He was walking in the Lord's way. The Lord's way is the high way.

I ministered in a church day-care center, teaching Bible stories to the children. I always interspersed questions in the lesson. No matter what question I asked, one child always gave the same answer: "Jesus." He figured that Jesus was a good bet to be the correct answer. He was right. We don't go wrong when we walk with Jesus. Another child I worked with, this one in a confirmation class, prayed one time, "We love you Jesus. You're the best God we ever had."

At a symphony concert, I watched the violin section carefully as the performance began. The eyes of the first violinist were on the music, and the eyes of the rest of the violinists were on her. When we look to Jesus, we look in the right direction. When we walk the Lord's way, we walk the way of wholeness and joy. We move on the summits of possibility and power.

Dear God, when I face your Son, I see no shadows. Amen
Prayer concern: Confirmation classes

A holy connection

[Paul] said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." (v. 2)

Having received the answer to his question, Paul moved to meet the need. He baptized these people in the name of the Lord Jesus, and they received the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit comes when we profess faith in Jesus Christ. It's a package deal. We receive the presence we need, because the human spirit fails unless the Holy Spirit fills. I remember when I thought I could live up to high ideals without any power from beyond myself. I was wrong. I needed the Holy Spirit to help me. The greatness we find in Jesus' disciples after his ascension was not their ability, but their openness to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us power.

We have a fireplace in our house, and I build a pretty good fire in it. I crumple up newspaper, add twigs, then sticks, and next logs. I pile it all up, and only then do I strike the match. When I put the match to the newspaper on the bottom, the whole pile ignites into a tremendous blaze. The Holy Spirit in our lives is like that match. It sets us on fire.

Come, Holy Spirit, and warm my life. Amen

**Prayer concern: Those who must work two jobs
to make ends meet**

God takes no holiday

He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. (v. 4)

This psalm expresses confidence in God as a guardian. The Hebrew root word for "to guard" appears in this psalm six times. In the Jewish community, this psalm is recited in times of trouble. It offers hope and assurance. Verse 4 promises that God never takes a holiday.

A train was traveling through a violent storm. Lightning flashed, thunder roared, and great pellets of rain battered on the windows as gusts of wind howled all around. A seven-year-old boy sat calmly in his seat, putting pieces of a puzzle together. His unusual quietude amazed the other passengers.

Finally, someone asked, "How can you be so calm, young man?"

The boy turned from his puzzle, lifted his face in a smile, and said, "My dad is the engineer of this train."

No matter what's happening to us, God is always present and in charge. No matter where we go, God capably goes with us. With God by our side, we have a lifetime supply of confidence. In God's company, we don't have to simply wade through life's troubled streams. We can pan for gold.

Dear God, when you are near,

I have no fear. And you are always near. Amen

Prayer concern: Those working in another country

What's in a name?

You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel. (v. 28)

Throughout the Bible, naming people is very important. A person's name defined a person's character and, if a person's character changed, the name might also be altered. Abram was changed to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, and Saul to Paul. Names reflected character.

In 1962, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy visited Pope John XXIII. Before she came, the pope was trying to decide how to address her. He could say, "Mrs. Kennedy." Or, because she was half French, he could say, "Madame Kennedy." The pope tentatively decided on the latter. But when the First Lady came into the papal apartments full of youth and spontaneity, he stretched out his arms toward her and said, "Jackie." The name went with the person.

If God named me according to the very heart of my being, what would I be called? When you consider honestly the heart of your own being, what do you think God calls you? What potential does God see in us that is worthy of a name change? Let us decide what we want God to call us and live our lives in the direction of that name.

**Dear God, give me a name of faithfulness
and righteousness and help me live up to it. Amen**

Prayer concern: Parents of newborns

What the Bible's for

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. (v. 16)

Many books give us information, but the Bible brings us to transformation. Søren Kierkegaard said most of us read the Bible the way a mouse tries to remove cheese from a trap without getting caught. We nibble cautiously at the Bible rather than savoring it deeply as essential for our lives right now.

The Bible is the story of how God loves us and searches for us. The Bible is the story of God coming to us in Jesus Christ, and its purpose is to show us how to receive Christ into our hearts. It is the greatest how-to book ever written.

Young Herbie bought Grandma a Bible for her birthday and wanted to write a suitable inscription inside. He remembered a book that his dad especially liked, and copied the inscription from this book into Grandma's Bible. You can imagine Grandma's surprise when she opened her Bible and found this phrase written neatly inside: "To Grandma, with the compliments of the author." Yet, appropriately, the Bible is God's letter of instruction to us. It is our manual for getting to know God.

Dear God, as I read your word, may I hear your call. Amen
Prayer concern: Those who distribute Bibles

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

**And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones
who cry to him day and night? (v. 7)**

Imagine what would happen to a baseball umpire who called all runners safe, regardless of whether they made it to the plate in time or not. Imagine what would happen to a football referee who gave teams a first down after every play, regardless of the yardage they actually made. Imagine a judge who let all defendants off, regardless of how compelling the evidence was against them. I don't know what would happen in these situations, but I think that perhaps tar and feathers might be involved! If these things happened, the least we would hear is, "It's just not fair!"

It is not fair, and yet that is exactly the kind of God we have. Our God will forgive us no matter what the sin. Our God gives us eternal life even though we don't deserve another minute. Our God calls us safe, gives us a first down, and rules in our favor with Christ's death and resurrection.

By human standards, God is not a fair umpire, impartial referee, or disinterested judge. It turns out that God doesn't care about fair; God cares about us and has bent all the rules to have us be with God.

**Loving God, you have judged in my favor even though
I don't deserve it. Help me to accept your judgment. Amen**

Prayer concern: Judges and jurors

St. Luke, Evangelist

So that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (v. 4)

When I graduated from sixth grade, I thought I knew pretty much everything there was to know. When I graduated from high school, I thought that maybe I needed to know a little more about a few things. When I graduated from college, I was sure I didn't know much at all. After completing graduate school, I realized that I knew basically nothing at all and that my parents suddenly had become smart again!

I didn't lose knowledge as I continued in school (well, not all of it anyway). What happened was that the more I learned, the more I realized how much there was to know. Learning never ends. That was true for biochemistry and food science, and it is even truer when it comes to learning about God.

The Gospel writer Luke knew this. Luke's friend Theophilus, which literally means "lover of God," was already instructed in the faith. Still, Luke wrote this Gospel so that Theophilus (and the rest of us God-lovers) would continue to learn about what God has done for us. Luke desired that we continue to hear God's word and know the truth.

**All-knowing God, help me
always to seek your truth. Amen**

Prayer concern: Sunday school teachers and students

You want me to do WHAT?

The LORD said to Hosea, “Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom.” (v. 2)

What has the Lord asked of you? Maybe teach a Sunday school class, tithe, or invite a neighbor to worship with you? No matter what God has asked of you, it probably pales in comparison with the difficult and involved task that God gave Hosea. Not only did God want Hosea to deliver harsh words to Israel, but God also asked Hosea to do so by marrying a whore, then having children with her whose names would be the actual message.

This passage contains both a message of judgment and a message of hope. God is angry enough with the people to send this explicit message, and “yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea” (v. 10). Even though the people have made tremendous mistakes, God has not and will not forget God’s promises or forsake God’s people.

I hope that God never calls me to a task like Hosea’s. I certainly will try not to deserve a visit from a prophet like Hosea. But regardless of how well I do or how often I fail, I know that God will never forget me or the promises God has made to me.

**Dear God, help me to love and forgive
others as you first have loved and forgiven me. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who do not know of God’s love

Your cheating heart

**For she said, "I will go after my lovers;
they give me my bread and my water, my wool
and my flax, my oil and my drink." (v. 5)**

Before there was "shock radio" to get our attention by being outrageous, and before there were afternoon talk shows on television that expose us to the most incredible ways people treat one another, there was Hosea. The book of Hosea is "shock Bible." God wanted to get the people's attention, and did so by talking to them in a way they never expected. God was tired of the people cheating with false gods. Not only did God want the worship and praise God deserved, but God also wanted to make sure the chosen people weren't tricked into following a god that would never deliver on any promises.

No matter how far we run away from God, God still loves us and wants the best for us. While membership in temples to Baal has fallen off lately, there are plenty of false gods that seem to have more to offer us than the one true God. But these temptations make only empty promises of happiness and prosperity. It is God who gives us everything, and it is God who takes us back when we finally listen to our cheating hearts.

**Spirit of Christ, help me be faithful
to the One who is always faithful. Amen**
Prayer concern: People in damaged relationships

This old temple

**Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. (v. 4)**

I like to watch remodeling shows and see what can be done to make a run-down building really live again. Sometimes a building needs cosmetic work, such as a coat of paint or new trimming. Other times the building needs structural repairs, such as a new foundation. The people who take on these projects usually don't do them because they are inexpensive or easy; often it would be cheaper and easier to tear down the old and build from scratch. These people renovate because they have a passion for history and are compelled to give back something for all that history has given them. They don't *have* to renovate ... they *get* to!

The same is true of worship. The psalmist describes a passion for worshiping God. To be in the presence of God makes worshipers go weak in the knees. Worship isn't something we *have* to do—it is something we *get* to do. We get to worship, sing, pray, and even sit down to a feast with the Creator of everything. It isn't always the easiest thing to do; sleeping in might be easier. It's not cheap either—there is a price to pay for following and worshiping God. But what it costs me is nothing compared to what God has first given me.

Dear God, thank you for letting me worship you. Amen

Prayer concern: Worship leaders

Truth and consequences

**Truly they have loved to wander, they have
not restrained their feet. (v. 10)**

I was warned not to climb out of the swimming pool by using the gutter that functioned as a water return. That gutter was good at collecting water. To my eight-year-old mind, it was also a great way to climb out of the pool. I don't know how many times I used the gutter as a step without incident, but I remember one time when I used the gutter as a step and got caught, literally. I stepped up on the gutter, and my foot slipped in and was stuck ... really stuck! My mom forgave me for breaking the rules, after all she loved me, but I still had to live with the consequences of extreme embarrassment. It took my mom, the lifeguards, and other volunteers to finally work my foot free from the gutter.

God loved the people of Israel. And, in spite of their constant rule breaking, God never deserted them. But their rule breaking, like mine, had consequences, and they had to live with these consequences. God wants us to follow the rules—not because God will stop loving us if we don't—but because God wants the best for us. God doesn't want us endure the pain or the shame of being stuck in a pool gutter, or worse.

Lord, help me follow your rules. Amen

Prayer concern: Lifeguards

Gum Guy

**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith. (v. 7)**

Guy was a retired Air Force colonel and a ball turret gunner in World War II. More than that, Guy was gifted with an extra measure of faith. It was a gift that influenced every part of his life. Guy understood God's grace better than anyone I have ever met, and he demonstrated this understanding whether serving on council or serving as acolyte. He was known as "Gum Guy" because he gave the kids gum after every worship service. While parents tried to make these gum treats rewards for good behavior, Guy always intended them to be unconditional gifts of grace.

When Guy became ill, his doctor recommended surgery. His wife and I saw Guy after surgery and told him that his abdomen was filled with cancer. He paused to absorb the news and then told us that he would like to pray for us. His faith was a gift from the Holy Spirit, and his strength came from God, right to the end of his life. Guy has indeed finished the race, fought the good fight, and kept the faith. May you and I have a fraction of the faith God gave to Gum Guy.

**Thank you, Lord, for the saints who
show us the power of your gift of faith. Amen**
Prayer concern: Members of the armed forces

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

God, I thank you that I am not like other people. (v. 11)

We told our kids that they were not allowed to eat in the guest room. One day Hanna came to tell us that her sister was drinking milk in the guest room. Maggie justified her actions, telling us that she was drinking, not eating. Maggie then pointed out that Hanna was chewing gum in the guest room. You can guess Hanna's excuse, "I am not eating, I am only chewing!"

Our children and God's children think like that. "I might be wrong, but she is more wrong, so I'm really not guilty. I'm actually innocent!" We like to see ourselves as better than others. While others break the law, we only bend the rules. While others steal, we just make a few copies. While others abuse their children, we simply leave the house early and work late.

Jesus was making the point that sin is sin, no matter how one tries to hide it. But more importantly, Jesus was teaching that the best way to live the lives we have been given is to force the secrets, lies, shame, and deceptions we harbor out into the open. With the light of Christ shining in those previously shady places, we can begin to really live.

Lord, shine your light into my life. Amen

Prayer concern: Parents and children

Come back

**Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (v. 17)**

Judah is in trouble again! God doesn't want the people's sacrifices, meetings, incense, festivals, or even their prayers. It looks bad for Judah, but not yet tragic. You see, God is still talking. And while God is still talking, there is hope. God does not want to get rid of the people of Judah; God wants them to live God's way. The people don't seem to be able to do that, even though God knows best. After all, God is the one who made them and us, so who would know better?

God has told us how to live, so why don't we follow God's words? Call it brokenness, the human condition, our fallen nature, or good old-fashioned sin—this is why we don't live the way God knows is best. In spite of our rebellion, God still wants to be our God and wants us to be God's people. So, here in this text, Judah, you, and I are reminded again of how God would have us live. Stop doing evil, learn how to do good, seek justice, and take care of people who need help. It seems simple, but it is so hard to live. That is why I'm glad God doesn't give up on us. God keeps calling us back, over and over and over.

Merciful Lord, help me live as you know is best. Amen

Prayer concern: Youth who have run away

May I have a peace?

**Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ. (v. 2)**

When it is time to share the peace in our church, I can always count on nine-year-old Jacob to come to me and give me the peace. He grabs my hand and shakes it up and down as far as his arms will reach. He takes my hand with both of his and shakes it like mad far longer than anyone else would consider "normal." Finally we stop so that the ushers can begin to receive the offering. I am certain that Jacob comes and shares that exuberant peace with me mostly because I play along. But I don't know if he realizes how appropriate his kind of peace really is.

Paul's greeting begins, "Grace to you and peace," but the grace and peace do not come from Paul alone. This is God's grace and peace that Paul is passing. Jacob also is not only giving me his peace but is passing God's peace to me as well. It is God's peace and grace that sustained the Thessalonians through difficult times, and it is God's peace and grace that holds onto us with energy, strength, and tenacity that are far greater than even Jacob's.

**Lord, let me live in your grace and
peace and pass it on with enthusiasm. Amen**
Prayer concern: Children who do not worship
with their families

The sinner

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." (v. 7)

The grumblers included the usual suspects—the scribes and Pharisees—but also some unexpected ones. The disciples and the other people on the street were grumbling too. Everyone was convinced that Zacchaeus was selfish and dishonest—a lost cause. No matter how hard Zacchaeus tried to see Jesus, no matter how high he climbed, no matter how hospitably he acted, no matter how generous and honest he promised to be with his money, the people on the street had labeled Zacchaeus a sinner.

Even though Zacchaeus struggled to find a way to see Jesus, and even though other people couldn't see Zacchaeus as anything but a sinner, Jesus looked for and found Zacchaeus. Jesus called to him not as a sinner, but as a son of Abraham and an inheritor of salvation. Jesus didn't listen to the grumbling about Zacchaeus then, and Jesus doesn't listen to the grumbling of the crowds today either. Jesus came to seek out and save the lost, and no amount of grumbling from us or anyone else will get in Jesus' way.

**Lord Jesus, find me
and save me every day. Amen**
Prayer concern: Grumblers

Testing spirits

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. (v. 1)

A spirit came to my office. I sat her down and pulled out the test and a #2 pencil. When she was done, I scanned her answers. She failed the test, so I sent her away. Clearly that spirit was not from God!

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to do this? However, the tricky spirits I encounter never knock; they come in the form of thoughts, suggestions, or ideas from radio, television, and a host of other places. These sneaky spirits tell me that more stuff means a better life, that a new car would make me look better, or that I can not possibly live another day without an "Electric Pimento Puller" for those perpetually pesky olive pimentos.

The messages that bombard us in this world are the spirits we must continue to test. The spirit that tells you that no one will love you without that pair of pants, a new car, or more hair is a spirit from the world, but not a spirit of God. On the other hand, the Spirit that tells you that in Christ you are a child of God, loved unconditionally for all time, is a Spirit of truth—a Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. Listen to that one!

God of truth, help me to listen to your Holy Spirit. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who work in advertising

All that glitters

**I will forgive their iniquity,
and remember their sin no more. (v. 34)**

A friend took me out to pan for gold. We went to a stream, and he showed me how to dig, rinse, swirl, and wash the dirt so that everything but the gold would be washed away. I was surprised when out of all that mud and gravel, one little sparkle of gold caught my eye. Surrounded by that deep, dark muck, there was a glimmer of hope.

This passage is a glimmer of hope from God, surrounded by the large muck of a people who refuse to listen. The consequences of not listening will be exile for them and ruin for their city. Even so, God will not abandon them; however, God will abandon the old way of relating to them. God will no longer count on people to pass on the faith. God will not count on people to come to God, but God will now come to God's people.

Is God changeable? Throughout the Bible, the way God relates to God's people continues to adapt. Each change is meant to bring us closer to God and closer to the relationship God intends for us. Thank God for this glimmer of hope in Jeremiah, which we recognize now as our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

**Dear God, help me to listen to your word
and hear what you are trying to tell me. Amen**

Prayer concern: Pastors

How many is "everyone"?**Is he not the God of Gentiles also?****Yes, of Gentiles also. (v. 29)**

Many people would say that Skip is not right in the head. He sees the world differently, which is why he is good with youth. At a youth softball game, several churches came to play, with nearly 60 kids in all. No one except Skip could imagine how everyone would get a chance to play. Skip gathered the group and told us everyone would play. He knew that the rules needed to change to make sure that everyone could be included. We played softball with teams of 30 in the field—and ran the bases backward just for kicks. It was great!

In Christ, God has changed the rules so that everyone is now included. Before, only Jewish people who followed the law could have a special relationship with God; but in Christ we have all been made children of God. We are all included. God changed the rules by sending Jesus. Jesus lived for everyone, Jesus died for everyone, and Jesus was raised for everyone. Whether someone knows it or not, or believes it or not, doesn't change the fact that every person that ever was or ever will be has been made right with God through Christ. God has changed the game so everyone wins.

**Give me faith, O God, to trust the
gift that you have given, Jesus Christ. Amen**

Prayer concern: Missionaries

Reformation Day

**And you will know the truth, and the truth
will make you free. (v. 32)**

Have you ever listened to a child's account of a fight with a playmate? Every parent and grandparent knows that the "truth" can take some amazing shapes. Often we adults are convinced that we know the truth. And we do know many truths, from medications for ailments that would have been deadly in Jesus' time to the timeless household wisdom we pass on to our children.

The early believers were convinced they knew the truth. They had been God's chosen people for many centuries. When Jesus offered them a new truth that would bring freedom, they were offended.

Are we so very different? In Holy Baptism, we have been adopted into the family of God, the family of truth. We have been chosen. And we may think we know the whole truth. But we are chosen to grow. In God's household, there is freedom to follow the leading of the Spirit in new directions, freedom to grow deeper in the truth. So don't spoil the surprises God may have in store for you. Let yourself grow!

**God of new directions, teach me to follow you
boldly, confident that I am held in your truth. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those whose faith is stagnant or rigid

All Saints Day

**Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the
assembly of the faithful. (v. 1)**

On the Sunday we observe All Saints Day in my congregation, a pastor reads the names of all those who have died during the past year. After each name is read, the worshipers respond by saying, "Present," and a bell is rung. In this way, the saints who can speak celebrate the presence of those who cannot.

This past All Saints Day, I skipped a name as I read through the list. I did not realize my error, but the worship assistant standing next to me did and discretely pointed to that name. As I read that name at the end of the list, I heard the congregation's response, "Present," and the sound of the bell. I was relieved to have corrected the error. After worship, I found out the assembly of the faithful had been listening closely. Several people said that by the time I reached the end of the list of saints, they were ready to stand up and call out the name I had missed.

The psalmist tells us that God takes pleasure in God's people. Surely this is a day of pleasure for God, who hears in the responses of the faithful a confidence in God's marvelous power to make all the saints count.

**God of all saints, never let me forget that all
the saints who once lived now live with you. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who mourn

A quiet confidence

**Then in my flesh I shall see God, whom
I shall see on my side. (vv. 26-27)**

Have you ever gotten close to a street preacher or sidewalk evangelist—you know, a person balancing a Bible in one hand and gesturing at passersby with the other, warning them to straighten up before Judgment Day? If you get too close and catch the preacher's eye, he or she will nail you. It's easy to feel intimidated by the shouting. It's easy to begin to think that everything wrong in your life results from what you've done to disappoint God.

Job faced the ultimate test of his confidence in God. Job's suffering brought from his friends not compassion and encouraging words, but criticism and derision. They claimed Job's illness was his own fault and that he deserved this punishment from God. Although his spirit trembled, Job remained confident that God was his redeemer, that God still claimed him.

In Holy Baptism, God claimed you. God will not desert you. Whatever disruptions invade your life, God will be your redeemer and constant companion. That's a promise.

**God, renew my confidence in
your promise to be with me always. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those with chronic illnesses

Remember who you are

**Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that
you were taught by us. (v. 15)**

Did your mother ever say, "Remember who you are"? Mine sure did! I heard these words whenever I left the house on a date or an outing with friends. These four words were an abbreviation for "Remember all I've taught you, all you've learned in church, the things your family values, the traditions that shaped you, how to be safe, and..." That one sentence contained all these reminders and more.

Paul gave the same instruction to his friends in Thessalonica. But when they heard from Paul, "Remember who you are," they also heard in the very next breath, "God will help you." The believers in Paul's fledgling churches were forever struggling to live up to his expectations, but thank God they were not laboring alone. In their failures and their faithfulness, God was there to support and renew.

What good news to hear that God will help us live up to who we are. It took me years to understand that behaving as if I remember who I am doesn't depend entirely on me. Are you leaning on God as you try to live as a Christian? God longs to "comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word."

Loving God, I am yours. Help me live as your child. Amen
Prayer concern: Young people facing difficult decisions

Forever praising God

Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living. (v. 38)

“How can God live in heaven when there’s nothing up there to stand on?” We often hear this kind of question from children. It is not unlike the questions the religious officials posed to Jesus: Suppose a woman whose husband has died becomes his brother’s wife (as was the custom), and suppose that husband dies and another brother marries her, and so on. Then, after they all die, in the resurrection, whose wife will she be? These questions were not born of curiosity. Rather, they were intended to catch Jesus in a legal trap.

Jesus’ response focuses not on the rules of the culture but on the freedom of God’s kingdom. In the resurrection there will be no marital ties, no ownership of things or people. We will have only one focus: the worship of the ever-living God. All who have ever lived will praise God together—as past, present, and future come together in God’s eyes. Our logical minds can never figure out God. God is not limited by physical impossibilities nor confounded by deadlines. Our existence is made holy by the One who frees us to show praise in this life and the next.

**God of the living, teach
me to sing your praise forever. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who are frustrated
by the mystery of God

Beastly visions

**My spirit was troubled within me,
and the visions of my head terrified me. (v. 15)**

Has your imagination ever turned a simple noise in the night into a terrifying evil? I will never forget a night I was terrified by the groan of a great beast. I was just a child, sharing my bedroom with my aunt, who slept in the other bed. As I lay in the dark and listened to the horrible noise, I imagined that the angry beast was right under my bed. Somehow before the dawn, my fear gave way to exhaustion, and I fell asleep. Nearly a year went by before I found out that my aunt is famous in the family for her loud snoring. I was finally able to laugh at the beast.

Daniel's vision, of course, was more frightening than mine. He saw four beasts representing the four great empires that threatened his people, the Jews. The message of his vision was that the beasts would not win. Those belonging to the Most High would be safe and would claim the kingdom forever.

We all face beasts, some imaginary and some very real. But remembering that we are loved by the Most High calms our fears. God's pleasure is always to walk between the beasts and us.

**Holy God, thank you for your love, which is
stronger than anything that threaten me. Amen**

Prayer concern: Children who live in fear

Saints among us

What is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints. (v. 18)

Tomorrow the church celebrates All Saints Day. This commemoration always reminds me of a favorite hymn, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." The verses sing of a doctor, a queen, a shepherdess, a soldier, a priest, and someone who was killed by a wild beast. I loved them all, not realizing until adulthood that each was a real figure, a saint of the church. The line I loved best was this one: "They were all of them saints of God, and I mean, God helping, to be one too."

I grew up assuming that all the saints were in heaven. How wrong I was! I never heard with the eyes of my heart the song's last verse, which proclaims that God's saints are all around us, right here and now. In today's reading, Paul prays for the believers in Ephesus that the eyes of their hearts would be opened to God's call. It is a call to full membership in the company of the saints, which is the body of Christ, the church. It is a call to sainthood on earth! Paul's prayer includes us. God equips us every day, through the Holy Spirit, to be saints.

God of all the saints, help me to be one as well. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who struggle
to discern God's call

All Saints Sunday

**If anyone strikes you on the cheek,
offer the other also. (v. 29)**

Do Jesus' instructions to the disciples trouble you? Many parents struggle with teaching their children to act with compassion yet not be afraid to defend themselves against bullies. Human instinct tells us to strike back, to take back what has been taken from us, and to hurt those who have hurt us. How difficult it is to follow instructions that go against our instincts. But here they are, right before us in the Gospel of Luke. My own life is full of instances of striking back. I'm as thick-headed as Jesus' disciples in Luke, who again and again fail to understand or support his plan.

When we look at the rest of Luke's story, we find Jesus practicing what he preached. Even though the ones he loved did not live up to his expectations, Jesus loved them in the very way he taught them to love others. To the thief on the cross who had taken from others, Jesus offered acceptance. For those who had crucified him, Jesus sought forgiveness. God continues to call us to do no less than Jesus did. When we fail to follow that call, God answers the crucified Christ's plea for our forgiveness and gives us a fresh start.

**Holy God, when we do not live as your children,
forgive us. Show us how to love as you love. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who are bullied

Courage to speak

**The word of the LORD ...
came to Micah of Moresheth. (v. 1)**

In a congregation council meeting, the sensitive issue of calling a youth pastor surfaced during budget discussions. Several council members spoke with conviction and authority about the direction our youth ministry should take. Then one of the two young people on council who represent youth raised her hand. She began to speak timidly, her voice quivering. As she continued, her voice gained strength. She made her point with such clarity and firmness that the council members listened. In a room full of adults, to raise her own voice took great courage.

Unlike his contemporary, Isaiah, the prophet Micah did not have a high social status. He did not hail from Jerusalem, rather from Moresheth, a small village of no distinction located south of the capital. He was a nobody who dared to criticize Jerusalem. Nevertheless, God's power filled his words, which are remembered for their indictment of Jerusalem and prediction of its destruction. Think of the courage it must have taken for Micah to speak. Would you have listened to him?

**Dear God, teach me to listen for your
words in the voices of the powerless. Amen**

Prayer concern: Advocates for victims of abuse

Because we can

**Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds ...
they perform it, because it is in their power. (v. 1)**

One foggy morning, a youthful driver sped past a stopped school bus, barely seeing the STOP flag and blinking lights. He did not see the two girls stepping off the curb and crossing the road to board the bus. He hit them, and one died. This tragedy happened in my town. The lives of three families were changed forever in that moment. The young driver passed the school bus because he could—speeding by was in his power.

The greedy oppressors described by the prophet Micah took what they wanted without thinking about others. They did so because they could. Although we may not behave in the brazen ways the oppressors in Micah's day did, you and I also are able to hurt others. We might harm someone by driving carelessly. We might offend someone by speaking angrily or threaten the livelihood of others by spending thoughtlessly.

God has made us able to follow a different path. Through Baptism, God fills us with the Holy Spirit to help us use our power in faithful ways. And when we fail to make good choices, we can turn to God for forgiveness and a new start.

Loving Lord, lead us to help build up others. Amen

**Prayer concern: Counselors working
with juvenile offenders**

Seeing with God's eyes

**Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision,
and darkness to you, without revelation. (v. 6)**

I used to work for a company with headquarters in a beautiful complex covering several acres. Employees there enjoyed delicious meals in a well-appointed café, on-site child care, a profit-sharing program, and much more. During the workday, we never encountered anyone who was struggling with homelessness, hunger, or a mentally illness. In fact, unless I sought out such people, I could go weeks without seeing them.

Whether a workplace, a neighborhood, or a church, any culture isolated from the rest of the world risks losing its awareness of God. Unless we meet those in need, we may grow to take for granted our own plenty. Likewise, unless we encounter and recognize our own sin, we lose our ability to recognize the Savior.

So it was for God's people in the days of the prophet Micah. Their exploitation of the poor and emotional separation from the needs around them hardened them to their own sin. They turned their eyes from God. They needed to listen to Micah. What voices in your life draw your attention to the needs around you and your need for repentance? Are you able to listen?

**God of truth, when I overlook the needs
of others or my own sin, open my eyes. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who serve people who are poor

A joyful noise

**Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises. (v. 4)**

I know some Christians who can't carry a tune even when surrounded by a battalion of accomplished singers. No matter—when the music starts, they sing. The sounds they make may not be music, but the noise is joyful. Others stand stiffly during worship, never opening their mouths to sing. It's hard to believe they are joining the congregation in praise.

There are many ways to praise. We can take a hint from the responses of children to music. If you've ever watched children in a music class, you know that children let their praise be known with their hands and their feet and the expressions on their faces. In today's reading, the psalmist acknowledges many forms of praise. He calls on the lyre, the horn, and the trumpets. He listens for the roar of the sea, the clamor of the creatures that fill it, the singing of the hills, and the noise of all who live on the earth.

Even if you're not a singer, let your praises for God's work in your life flow—not only from your lips but from your whole being. Imagine what would happen if you clapped your hands in worship!

**Lord of singing, show me how to
make you smile with my praise! Amen**

Prayer concern: All who make music to praise God

Old wounds

But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. (v. 2)

While visiting my aunt and uncle in Louisiana when I was about 10 years old, I threw a large rock right through the top of their back porch screen. I didn't mean to do it, of course. I was trying to dislodge a Frisbee that had become stuck in the gutter along the roof of the house. Everyone else was in the front part of the house, so no one heard the rock tear the screen and land inside the back porch. And I never admitted what happened. Looking back, how I wish I had told my aunt and uncle what I had done. Instead, I carried that pain for many years. God's healing was available to me then, and in a moment of confession, my family's love and forgiveness would have mirrored God's.

Are there long-ago mistakes or failings in your life that remain unresolved? Do you still ache because of hurt feelings, broken relationships, or promises not kept? If so, hear the reassurance of Malachi, whose name means "my messenger." Those who revere God's name will feel the healing power of God's righteousness covering their failures. God longs to cover you with healing wings.

Merciful God, help me to feel your forgiveness. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are alienated
from family members

Quiet laborers

**Brothers and sisters, do not be weary
in doing what is right. (v. 13)**

We all know Christians who work hard for the community of Christ without calling attention to themselves. It's easy to overlook their activity. Even when we do notice, our praise often surprises these quiet laborers. They don't seek praise. Rather, their reward is in seeing their work bear fruit.

One such person in my congregation schedules the volunteers who serve meals and do laundry at our local shelter. Along with his wife and children, he serves many hours in the ministry there. When someone praises him for his commitment, he is quick to say that willing volunteers make the scheduling easy and that the job is its own reward. You probably know Sunday school teachers, committee chairpersons, and behind-the-scenes volunteers who are quiet laborers. You may be one of them. Many people who serve would tell you that their joy is watching their work bear fruit. But weariness comes to every worker, no matter what rewards the work brings. Why not say "thank you" to someone today who labors quietly for the Lord?

**God, you call me to bear fruit. Put me to
work in the labor you have chosen for me. Amen**

Prayer concern: Volunteers who work with
those who are homeless

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

**The days will come when not one stone
will be left upon another. (v. 6)**

I have seen some fine church buildings. I'm partial to stained glass and rich woodwork. I love the holiness I sense in some places. I have had the privilege to belong to congregations that have inherited beautiful buildings. Many Christians can say this. Our forebears cared deeply about the buildings they considered most holy. How many churches and cathedrals have been raised up to God's glory? How many of them are filled with the piety and commitment of those people who have gone before us?

Jesus, however, didn't want anyone to become too attached to a worship space. When some people were admiring the temple, Jesus was quick to remind them that even something as enduring as a place of worship is temporal.

Jesus has a way of calling us to the very core of things. The power of the Christian faith is not tied up in the security or sturdiness of a building. God's power surpasses anything we can imagine. Many people and things will claim to be as powerful and as sure a place to put our trust. Jesus calls us to himself instead, the one who is true and sure.

Jesus, give us the wisdom to follow you. Amen

Prayer concern: New congregations

Fleeing from God

Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (v. 1)

Oh, Jonah, you are not alone. How many of us have tried to flee from the presence of the Lord? How many of us have refused God's wisdom or risen up in anger when the world was unfair? How many of us have not believed that God is God?

But how many of us have also known the chaos that can engulf us—like the storm that engulfed Jonah's boat—when we have taken God's mantle on ourselves? Isn't it human short-sightedness that pollutes our earth? Isn't this our doing, having failed time and again to understand and honor the deep interrelatedness that God created into the fabric of our world? Isn't it our own hubris that blinds us to the plight of so many people who hunger for food, peace, or opportunity? When a storm of anger wells up among those whose lives are bound by poverty, oppression, or despair, should we be surprised? It is so humbling to have to turn to God, when we would rather be the ones who know, who command, who own.

Oh, Jonah, you are not alone. We are with you on that ship. We know that the chaos can be traced to us. We confess that we too have fled from God's presence.

Hear our confession, O God. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who struggle for dignity

Light in the darkness

Yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O LORD my God. (v. 6)

Few people reach the end of life without any nasty surprises. A job is lost, a fire destroys, health fades, a child strays, a love sours. We may never realize the dreams that electrified our youth. There are times for each of us when the "light at the end of the tunnel" seems faint indeed, when despair may be our daily companion. In many ways, these days are "tomb" days, when we wait fervently for a resurrection—some good news, some brightness to encourage us to continue.

Jonah recalled that gloom as the Pit, an allusion to the smoldering garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. It is an image remarkably like people's current image of burning in hell. The story says Jonah waited, having confessed his sin, in the belly of a great fish. He also confessed his faith; God had at other times brought him out of the purifying fires.

Our dark times can be this for us also. Dark times push us to God, to see nothing but God, to trust nothing but God. And when we eat and drink the holy meal, we confess that God will bring light into darkness. As God raised Jesus to new life, so will you be raised, from whatever Pit is yours this day.

O God, praise be to you for new life in Christ. Amen
Prayer concern: Those who suffer from depression

Love and wrath together

**God changed his mind about the calamity ...
he did not do it. (v. 10)**

At first glance, it would seem that a loving god would be far preferable to a god of wrath and judgment. Who wouldn't want a god who is always kind and warm? Who wouldn't want a god who doesn't rock the boat or call us to acts of justice? But in this scenario, what happens when we need to be called to task? What happens when evil rears its ugly head, and we face it with a god only capable of affection? We would be destroyed in the face of evil. We would lapse into unrelenting selfishness if we were never called to task. Our vision is too small, and our power is too limited. We need a god of power, justice, and strength.

It is apparent, from the story of Jonah, that we also have a god whose mind can change. Our decisions affect God. Our actions have an impact. We are, clearly, in relationship. We are not merely ornaments in God's collection.

The truth of God's love is that God's wrath comes as part and parcel of it. Without wrath, God's love would be too limp to sustain us in the face of all that is before us. We will be surprised by God's judgment, as Jonah was, but we will continue to be God's, no matter what.

God of power, teach us to see your wrath as a gift. Amen
Prayer concern: Managers

God, our refuge

[God] makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. (v. 9)

The world is not always a pretty place. Nations war against nations. Rivalries wrench people from health and home. Economic turmoil and greed can blind us to the global consequences of our actions. We need a big god. What a wonder it would be if wars ceased, spears were broken, and shields were burned. What a wonder it would be if we faced each other as human beings, without symbols of dominance standing between us, as if we were all children of God.

Even if we are not experiencing military war on the soil we call home, we do know war. It happens in families, between friends and neighbors, and in our congregations. We know how subtle war can be, but it is war just the same. What if God made these wars to cease as well? What abundance and peace would be ours then? And who would we be if we were not vying, scheming, and positioning? What peace would we know if God had God's way with us?

Grace and hope says God is having God's way with us. We do not have to contend with each other. We are welcomed into the household of God.

**The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of our forebears is our refuge. Amen**
Prayer concern: People living in war-torn areas

Brought back to the fold

Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them. (v. 3)

If on this day you find yourself feeling scattered in a land you do not know, God offers a promise. Like the ancient people of Israel, we can be trapped in foreign places, our own kinds of Babylon, where people speak languages too strange to understand. You may be able to trace the steps that brought you into exile. Perhaps you are the victim of your own undoing; perhaps circumstances have conspired against you. No doubt, you miss home and yearn for what was—the familiar.

The witness of our forebears points to a mystery. Sometimes, when we trace our steps, we may see God's hand at work. In hindsight, we may see that in exile we have grown through the loneliness and pain. We may even, as our forbears did, see God's judgment.

The prophet Jeremiah held up for his people the promise that always lives with God's judgment. God's claim on you will never fail. God will bring you back, gather you with all of us who find ourselves adrift, and bring us all to a good pasture under a wise and watchful eye. In Jesus, we see this promise made flesh. As surely as Christ rose from the dead, new life is yours today.

Loving Shepherd, gather us to your pasture. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are incarcerated

Mystery

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell onto their faces before the throne and worshiped God. (v. 11)

In just under a month, we will hear another chorus of angels—those who illuminate the night sky over a manger, singing to heaven and earth that God has come in the flesh. We hear those angels and are reminded that soon we will bend over a manger and coo for the lovely Christ child. But in this text, there is little room for sentimental sighing. In John's vision, thunder claps and lightning roars. The ruler of the universe is enthroned in glory, and the creation, both in time and beyond, pays homage.

Is it a wonder to you to consider both of these images for God—the spectacular sovereign and the infant mild? Just think about how each is a picture of the One. Each image is a glimpse of our God. In the sovereign before whom we quake, these words reside: *I will guide you to springs of the water of life, and will wipe away every tear from your eye.* In the infant, these words take root and grow: *My mercy is for those who fear me, from generation to generation.* Both words are of one God. Praise be to God.

O God, your mystery is beyond us. Draw us to you. Amen
Prayer concern: Those who care for grieving loved ones

Christ the King

Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us! (v. 39)

Today we might expect a text that paints a picture of royalty. Today we might expect to see the Messiah enter a cathedral of honor, dressed in the finest. The Messiah, for whom God's people have waited for centuries, should be borne in majesty to a throne of power and wisdom. We should stand in reverence, and the whole world should know that this is the one God.

How ironic, then, that on Christ the King Sunday our Messiah should be hanging from a cross, shame laden and dying. How ironic it is that the soldiers who beat him cast lots for his meager clothing, that a criminal with whom he was being punished derided him, and that the gawkers gathered on that hill top spent their energies taunting him. What kind of sovereign is this? What kind of power? What kind of hope can this Messiah inspire?

But we know this is not the whole story. We know that in only three days Jesus will rise again. God's drive for life will be affirmed once and for all. We will know that Christ is the One for whom we have waited. We will know life that surpasses all outward trappings; life with power insists on its way. This life is ours through Christ, our King.

Jesus, save us. Give us life. Amen

Prayer concern: The health of the church

In telling and in doing

**For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good. (v. 9)**

Imagine streams of the faithful winding their way through the streets of the ancient city, eyes ahead, walking to the temple on the hill. Great processions gathered from faraway lands to worship the God they shared. Jerusalem was their home. Jerusalem beckoned everyone.

We do not have such an earthly place to unify us—modern Jerusalem is a place that symbolizes our divisions. Our eyes look in many directions, to many holy places. Yet our stories of faith draw us together. We remember as one, telling again and again the sacred stories that shape us.

In this week, we are in the between times of the church year. Yesterday, we shouted our praises to Christ, our King, ending the year in glory. Today, we turn toward Advent and wait for the promise to be fulfilled once again. We gather around the stories that have renewed generations before us. Our stories and prayers tell of seeking good, and so we are unified not only in our telling, but in our doing. We pray for peace, for ourselves and for all people, that we might be one in honor of our Creator.

For your sake, gracious God, we seek good. Amen
Prayer concern: The United Nations

The Lord is God

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. (v. 1)

I watched the infant girl, perhaps 12 months old, as we began to sing. The music surrounded her restlessness (the sermon was too long for her young body), and she struggled to stand on her father's lap. Soon she was bouncing to the rhythm, head bobbing, knees bending and straightening. Then her mouth opened and she began to sing along. It was a joyful noise, and it sparked smiles all around. She was radiant. We adults, of course, have been taught manners. We have learned to behave in church. We know that such spontaneity would not wear well from someone our age.

But aren't there times when you feel as transported as that little one? Aren't there times, perhaps even in worship, when the love of God and the magnificence of God's promises well up inside of you? Has your joy ever swelled from deep within and "threatened" to become a joyful noise, loose and free?

What would happen if we gave voice to this kind of exuberance? The psalmist invites us to say thanks for God's great gifts. Today find a moment to express your thanks by singing, writing, drawing, or dancing. Do this alone or with others you trust.

God, your steadfast love endures forever. Thank you. Amen

Prayer concern: Parents who worship
with their children

Keeping joy

If there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (v. 8)

This verse is an important reminder. After watching the news, one might conclude that the world is a nasty place. It is impossible, of course, to paint war, poverty, crime, or pollution in a positive light. As people of faith, we dare not ignore these things or else we ignore God's call to care for creation and for people who are suffering in the world—those who lack voice and power.

Yet, if all of our focus is on what's bad in the world, we might develop pretty negative attitudes. We might begin to lose sight of the fact that God created this world and us, and called it all good. We might even begin to lose hope in God's promise of love and new life.

How is it possible to sustain our joy? How can we continue to answer God's call to make the world a better place? We can open our eyes and look all around us for that which is honorable, just, or praiseworthy. We can fix our hearts and our minds on Christ Jesus, who is God's clear promise of good. We can rejoice, not because the world is flawless, but because God's goodness keeps making its way into our lives.

God of peace, be with us.

Open our eyes to your wonders. Amen

Prayer concern: Journalists

Enduring food

Do not work for the food that perishes. (v. 27)

Today, citizens of the United States are celebrating Thanksgiving. Many will gather with family and friends to give thanks for the abundance in their lives and to celebrate the material blessings they have enjoyed during the past year. And in our culture, material abundance is prominent; being a consumer is practically a patriotic act. Many U.S. citizens who spend time living in other nations, especially those with far less wealth, come back puzzled by the lavish hospitality offered to them there—how can people be happy when they have so little?

Jesus bids us work for food that endures for eternal life. Certainly, this food includes faith in Christ, hope in God's steadfast love, and the peace of the Spirit's blessing. But food that endures is also about the way we live our lives here and now. So, if we seek food that endures, what will it be? We know. Our relationships with each other and with the creation around us require our energy and nurture. Forgiveness is expensive, as is peace-making. But investing in this food releases us from bondage to material goods as the source of happiness. This food opens us to see all others as God's own, and causes justice to flow.

O God, bread of life, draw us to satisfaction in you. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are lonely

Vision of God's reign

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (v. 4)

"In days to come ..." Isaiah's vision looked ahead and held up a picture of God's coming reign. Isaiah gave voice to God's own desire. It was the word of the Lord. "In days to come ..." What do you long for in God's coming reign? What is on your list? Here's mine:

- Peace throughout the world, with a resolution of conflicts that have stymied peacemakers.
- Sufficient, nutritious food for all.
- Equal opportunity and meaningful work for all.
- A healthy earth, with humankind and all creation living in balance.
- A sustainable global economy.
- Healthy communities and good homes for everyone.

Today, offer prayer for such a world, and do one thing to help it come to pass. Today, rest in the hope that God desires good for you and for all people. Remember that in days to come, and even today, the mountain of the Lord's house is established as the highest of all mountains. We can look to God for help and home.

Dear God, teach us your ways, that we may walk in your paths and live in your reign. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who work for peace

Waking up to Christ

**Salvation is nearer to us now than when
we became believers. (v. 11)**

When our belief was young, we may have thought in stark contrasts—good or bad, true or false, hope or despair, right or wrong. God may have seemed to be a faraway judge who presided over our actions.

As we have matured, we have seen within ourselves the stark contrasts we once saw only in others. We have come to understand ourselves not as people who sin, but as sinners who bear within us both good and bad, truth and falsehood, hope and despair, right and wrong. Life is multifaceted, layered, and not always easy to sort out.

Paul invited the Romans to wake from sleep, to live honorably as in the day. So we are invited to awaken to our whole selves, even those characteristics we would rather deny or ignore—the selfish, cruel, or indifferent parts. We are called to see ourselves as God does. And we are invited to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and to see that God, in Christ, loves even our less savory parts. In Christ, we might see these parts of ourselves as gifts that sensitize and shape us into the people God is calling. Salvation is nearer to us now.

**Jesus, shine your light of love on me
and claim my whole being for your purpose. Amen**

Prayer concern: Adolescents

First Sunday in Advent

**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my
words will not pass away. (v. 35)**

"You just don't know who you can trust any more."
The words left the mouth of a young woman with great pain and a sense of isolation. We say, "Talk is cheap." That means promises are not kept, vows are broken, and guarantees are unsupported. Words are flung about without a sense of permanence. It leaves us feeling defenseless.

Jesus' words speak to our needs. God has listened to our heartaches and our loneliness and assures us that God's word is trustworthy. As we look toward Christmas, we celebrate the eternal Word of God made flesh in Jesus. We remember that it is a word of power, grace, and peace. Advent also anticipates the birth of Jesus in eternal glory. This will be time of great celebration for all who have lived with faith in Jesus!

Let this Advent be a time to listen carefully to God's word, that we might find there a source of healing and help for our daily needs.

**O Lord, thank you for your word—
a word of trust and hope and helpfulness. Amen**

**Prayer concern: Those who feel isolated
and bitter this season**

Looking past the simple signs

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (v. 1)

As we prepare for Christmas—readying our lives for the celebration of Jesus' birth—we feel a sense of sadness for those who do not know the Lord. Gaudy displays of lights do little to brighten up a heart that is dark and yearns for so much more. The psalmist speaks to a similar issue, applauding creation as a sign of God's glory. Creation is only a sign, for its wonder will pass away. Just as the elaborate decorations and beautiful music this season are signs of something far greater to come (for a sign always points to something beyond it), so creation also points to our great and glorious God. God stands behind all the stunning beauty of the earth and all the glories of this season.

As you move through Advent, center your thoughts on the One who came and is coming again. Place your heart in the care of the One who will reveal power and glory beyond imagination when Christ returns. Reach out with loving invitation to those who have not heard of the glories that await beyond the simple signs of this season.

O God, enable us to look beyond the earthly symbols of this season to your love, which beckons us in Jesus. Amen

**Prayer concern: Those who do not see
Christ in Christmas**

St. Andrew, Apostle

He brought Simon to Jesus. (v. 42)

On this day we remember the apostle Andrew, who lived in hope and was always looking for ways to serve his Lord. It is not strange that Andrew, realizing that Jesus was the Messiah, ran immediately to his brother, Simon, and brought him to meet God's Anointed One. Andrew had studied the scriptures, filled with God's promises, so he was prepared to identify the Savior.

Opportunities seem to favor those who are prepared. As we prepare for Christmas, it is important to be faithful in our Bible reading and worship so that we might be prepared to recognize God's gifts and to receive them. Like Andrew, once we have received the gifts of God, then we can know the joy of sharing them. God bless you in your Advent preparations.

**Dear Lord, open my heart to receive your
precious gifts and to share them with others. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who have not experienced
the riches of God's grace

Preparing to receive God's gifts

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. (v. 31)

It was a hard saying—not just because Jesus said it to the religious leaders and the elders, but also because it ran counter to what they had been taught. They had believed that God favored the Jews and that to be Jewish was to be assured of salvation. Now Jesus called all of that into question. What made it especially hard was that in their society, there were those considered *regular sinners* and then there were those considered *really bad sinners*, including tax collectors and prostitutes. But as Jesus pointed out, any sinner who repents is open to receive God's rich gifts of grace, including salvation.

What the religious leaders in Jesus' day had difficulty understanding (as we often do too) was that God is the great gift-giver. It is only our own unwillingness to open our hearts to God's forgiving love that prevents God from blessing us. As we move through this season of preparation for gift-giving, let us also take time to repent, and so prepare our hearts to receive the wonderful gifts of God.

Generous Savior, pour out upon us the riches of your grace that we may celebrate your gifts in us. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who fret over their Christmas preparations, neglecting to prepare their hearts

Representing the goodness of God

**May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
and give deliverance to the needy. (v. 4)**

Does your church have special drives for individuals who are in need of donations—"for those less fortunate than us, so that they might have cause to celebrate this Christmas"? It is common for churches of nearly all denominations to find ways to help those who struggle for daily survival.

It might surprise you that even before there was an organized church, the prophets of Israel were challenging God's people to remember to help those among them who were poor. In the Jewish culture, the king represented God to the people. Thus, the psalmist in our reading today encourages the king, through the hymn of the people, to be faithful to God's calling so that the poor might have cause to rejoice.

In a very real sense, churches represent God to the world. The ministry of congregations can be in tune with the heart of God when they seek for all people to have their basic needs met. We represent God best when we think of others.

**Dear Lord, give me a generous heart, that
others may experience your love through me. Amen**

**Prayer concern: Those who are destitute
this season**

Unwrapping God's present of peace

The wolf shall live with the lamb ... the calf and the lion and the fatling together. (v. 6)

The picture the prophet portrays here seems an unlikely one. Could there ever be a time when predators are able to live in peaceful co-existence with their prey? Or could there ever be a time when human adversaries (such as Jews and Palestinians or Kurds and Iraqis) are able to live together peacefully? Or how about you and me—could there ever be a time when we are able to live in peace with those people toward whom we bear antagonism?

Clearly the prophet's portrait of God's way is not overdrawn, and the issue is an important one as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. To unwrap and enjoy God's good gifts—especially the gift of peace—we need to be willing to set aside our personal feelings and let God's love flow through us into the lives of those we perceive as adversaries as well as those we love. We may not be able to put into place a peace plan for the entire world, but we can let the Holy Spirit create peace in our hearts and in our daily lives.

Forgiving God, help me to be as willing and generous as you are in sharing a spirit of peace. Amen

Prayer concern: Those you feel antagonism toward

God's gift of hope

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope. (v. 13)

God has a way of knowing what we need. Perhaps that is why God's gifts are so timely and so necessary. We do not live happily without God's gift of hope. A common symptom of depression is a sense of hopelessness. Children without hope for a future lose their zest for life and their zeal for engaging with others. Without hope our souls shrivel and our hearts grow cold. Hope, like faith and love, is essential not only for a healthy spiritual life but for all aspects of life, period.

Paul tells us that the Bible was written for our instruction so that we might have hope. In the Bible we are reminded of God's generous gifts, especially the gift of hope. Our hope rests in the love of God. This love reassures us with gifts of joy now and the promise of the great revealing of the gift of eternal life to come.

**Precious Savior, thank you for the
wonderful gift of hope that we receive from
your hand each day. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who struggle to hope

Second Sunday in Advent

Bear fruit worthy of repentance. (v. 8)

What do you think of when you hear the word *repent*? Do you picture an angry-looking man shaking his finger at you? Many people do. They think of repentance as a time of gloom and doom, and so they try to avoid it for as long as possible.

But these images are worlds away from what John was describing in these verses; it's incredible how we have missed the actual meaning. Repentance means much more than merely feeling sorry for what we have done. Literally, *repentance* is an action word; it means to make an "about face." Through disobedience we turn away from God; in repentance we turn around 180 degrees and run into God's welcoming, forgiving arms.

What are the fruits that bear repentance? Since repentance is not only a decision to turn from sin but also a desire to draw closer to God's heart, we have the privilege of serving God. In this way, we are able to know the joy of sharing the gifts of God's goodness. Our acts of serving bear our repentance.

**Loving Lord, thank you for your
forgiveness and the joy of serving you. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those whose guilt and fear keep
them from believing in God's forgiving love

Loving the Giver

**Ah, you ... who do not regard the deeds of the LORD,
or see the work of his hands. (v. 12)**

Most of us do our Christmas shopping carefully. We think about those whom we love and try to find things that will make them happy. Deep within us is the hope that the ones who receive the gifts will respond with affection toward us. The prophet in our lesson for today suggests that this may be true of God as well.

Isaiah sees the people's preoccupation with houses and property. He sees their fascination with feasting and partying, and observes that they do not sense the Lord's presence in all the gifts they are enjoying. Thus, instead of being able to respond with celebration to the love of God, which lies behind their gifts, they become enslaved to things. They lose out on the wonderful assurance of knowing that they are held in the embrace of God's love.

Let this season of preparation be filled with appreciation for God, who loves us and who provides daily gifts to fill our lives with happiness and joy.

**Dear God, thank you for your gifts
and for the love behind these gifts. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who see the gifts
but not the Giver

Honest evaluation

The Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness. (v. 16)

At the first reading of this fiery section of the prophet's words, it would appear that God is a God of vengeance and retaliation. It is important to understand that the words "Ah, you" (or "Woe to you," in other translations) do not convey bitter hostility. Rather, these words are more of an expression of the inner pain one feels when loved ones waste their talents or do things that one knows will bring them hardship. "Ah, you" are words of frustration and heartache.

So the prophet calls each person to look at herself or himself seriously and honestly. These words speak especially to those who pretend to be good, but who actually have evil intentions. These words speak to people who "think they're smart," but who bring harm to others and shame upon themselves.

Advent is a time of soul searching. Advent is a time to turn and return to the Lord, so that we might be prepared to receive God's gifts. It is a time to prepare ourselves to celebrate God's goodness with genuine gladness when Christ comes again.

**O God, walk with me, that I may know the
peace of your presence and live in holiness. Amen**

**Prayer concern: For honesty in evaluating our
relationships with God and others**

Trusting in the promises

**Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not
let your heart be faint. (v. 4)**

The king's situation in Israel at the time of the prophet was shaky at best, and it must have been frightening to hear that several of the warlords were uniting against him. We read that King Ahaz and his people "shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." But the word of the Lord to Ahaz came through the prophet Isaiah: "Do not fear!" It was a test of faith, and the extent to which King Ahaz was able to pass the test would say a lot about his future and the future of Israel.

Although the circumstances have varied, the testing of God's people throughout the ages has been experienced in much the same way. In the history of any congregation, there are faithful people who, when faced with great difficulties, found the promises of God to be a great assurance and source of strength and hope. As you face the days ahead, in the midst of your problems, hear God saying to you, "Take heed, be quiet, and do not fear, for I am with you."

Gracious God, thank you for your trustworthy promises.

Strengthen me to rely only on your power. Amen

Prayer concern: Those shaking in fear over
the difficulties in their lives

Be a means of God's faithfulness

**Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God. (v. 5)**

Trust in God has always been in the hearts of God's faithful people. The riches of God are seen in God's everlasting faithfulness and absolute reliability. You can count on God.

For the psalmist and for us, a very real part of relying on God is our response—specifically a response of thanks. Because we know of God's desire for justice for the oppressed and care for those who are hungry and homeless, it only makes sense that our thankful response is to seek justice and provide for those who are poor.

Faith is not so much a concept to be believed as it is a life to be lived. Faith is always active in love. The love we have in our hearts during this Advent season motivates us to not only prepare gifts for loved ones, but also to share with those who are in need. God uses our generosity to bring happiness to those who are poor, whose trust is in God.

**Generous God, may we reflect your goodness as
we share our gifts during the holiday season. Amen**

**Prayer concern: For the generosity of
all people of faith**

Living confidently in God

Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. (v. 4)

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt helpless and scared? It was a common occurrence for God's people of Isaiah's time, just as it is for many people today. Indeed, life is unpredictable for all of us. There are so many forces "out there" that can frustrate our dreams and jeopardize our security.

Knowing the fragile nature of life, the prophet assures the people of God that they have cause to hope and reason to rejoice. God is an awesome God who will come with terrible vengeance to strike at the heart of evil. It is doubtful that those who first hear Isaiah's words know that the form of God's retaliation will not be to lash out in anger, but rather to spring forth with amazing grace by sending the Messiah to die for us. That is why Isaiah, in God's Spirit, can prophesy, "Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

**Eternal God, we praise you for all the ways
you bless us through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who feel helpless

Waiting for Christ's return

**Strengthen your hearts, for the coming
of the Lord is near. (v. 8)**

In Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, two men wait for a third man, who ultimately never shows up. Sometimes it may seem that Christ's promise to return will not happen. It's easy to think that if Christ hasn't come by now that maybe he's not coming. That was certainly the thought at the time of the first readers of the book of James. Of course, in those early days of the church, the Christians expected Jesus to return at any moment. Here, James encourages those early Christians to "hang in there" and have confidence in Christ's promise.

Every generation of Christians since the early church has seen their age as a fitting time for Christ to return. And each age, in turn, has passed without the Second Coming of the Lord. We too must "strengthen our hearts," for the latest time that Jesus will return is when we die and Jesus Christ comes to receive us into the kingdom. In the meantime, we will simply have to wait and trust, knowing that whenever Christ comes, it will be the right time.

**Eternal Savior, send your Spirit into our hearts,
so we may know we are always in your presence. Amen**

**Prayer concern: Those whose occupations
put their lives at risk**

Third Sunday in Advent

**Are you the one who is to come,
or are we to wait for another? (v. 3)**

It was difficult for John the Baptist. He knew that Jesus was special. After all, following Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, John heard a voice from heaven say, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). But in prison John wondered. So he sent his followers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come?"

It is the question at the heart of all of our doubts as well: "Are you truly God's Son? Are you the One in whom we are to place our faith and our lives?"

In response, Jesus answers John and us: *Look what I have done, see how I have fulfilled all prophecy. Take heed to the good news I have shared.*

We have far greater reason than John to respond to Jesus in trusting faith. Knowing that Jesus went on to die on a cross for us and to rise from death gives us the assurance that not only was Jesus sent from God, but also that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Savior.

**Blessed Savior, I believe that you are
the Christ, the Son of the living God. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those whose faith is wavering

Set your hope in God

I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. (v. 17)

Isaiah has been told that God is upset with the ways of the people. They have turned to materialism for meaning. They have turned to war for security. They have neglected the needs of the poor. They have turned to psychics and fortune-tellers for assurance for the future.

Strangely, Israel's pitfalls are our stumbling blocks as well. When seeking meaning, security, or assurance for the future, we search in many places for answers. The Bible declares that the eternal God is our only true hope. Therefore, we are to turn away from horoscopes and psychics who talk with "familiar spirits" (a term for the voices of those who presume to talk with the dead). We are to shun the use of crystals for mystical purposes and other New Age practices. With Isaiah, we are to affirm that our hope is in the Lord. It is God and God alone who holds history in almighty hands and will provide.

**Eternal God, forgive our weaknesses
and help us center our hopes on you. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who chase after false gods

Facing the future with God

No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation. (v. 20)

It is not unusual that in these days of violence and terrorism throughout the world, God's people begin to think about the biblical prophecies of the end times. What is unusual is that religious frauds often use the fearful words of these prophecies to alarm people.

Jesus did not spend a great deal of time on the subject of the end times, and when he did, he used a special method of speaking called "apocalyptic language," a prophetic idiom of fantastic imagery. For other examples, see the description of Jesus' birth in Luke 3:4-6 or the description of the pouring out of the Spirit on Pentecost in Acts 2:17-21.

Instead of living in fear, we can trust the actions of God by the works and words of Jesus—the deeds and speech that reflected God's manifest mercy and awesome love. The future belongs to a loving God, and so do we!

**Loving Lord, calm our spirits, and keep
alive within us trust in your loving-kindness. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who fear the future

When God gets angry**[God's] hand is stretched out still. (v. 17)**

How do you express anger? Some of us shout and wave our fists. Others scowl and walk away. However we might express our anger, most often a wall goes up between us and the one with whom we are angry. Anger is an inevitable component of our human interactions. In our relationships with friends and strangers alike, we hurt and get hurt. We often fear the wrath of others, especially when we are uncertain about how they will express their anger. How much more we may fear God's anger. God could snuff us out with a single blow. God could build a wall that would keep us away permanently.

Reviewing the Bible reveals that God has expressed anger on numerous occasions. No doubt, God still gets angry. God gets angry because God loves humans so much. God gets angry when we hurt one another or ourselves. However, today's text reveals that when God gets angry, God does not build walls. When God gets angry, God never turns away. God tears down walls. And the same God whose hand stretched out to the people of Israel still reaches out to us.

**Merciful God, grant me the compassion to
be merciful to those with whom I am angry. Amen**

Prayer concern: Victims of violence

The good old days

**Restore us, O God; let your face shine,
that we may be saved. (v. 3)**

A friend told me about his daughter, who was struggling to adjust to second grade. She said, "I miss the good old days back in first grade. School isn't what it used to be." Nostalgia affects people of all ages. Faced with present challenges and an uncertain future, many of us long to return to a familiar past.

The writer of Psalm 80 echoes this sentiment, calling out, "Restore us, O God." Clearly, this psalm was written at a time of uncertainty and distress. The psalm asks God to make things as they used to be.

What are your "good old days"? They may be the time before illness or adversity touched your life. You may have been more energetic. We may long to go back, yet our lives do not move in that direction. God propels us forward. Even if our fortunes are restored, we cannot return to the past. Still, we need not pine over the way things used to be. God has promised us a glorious future. Eternal life will be more marvelous than anything we have ever experienced. Why would we want to go back when our future shines so brightly?

**Thank you, Jesus, for promising a
future beyond my wildest imagination. Amen**
Prayer concern: People who are adjusting to
major changes

A sign from God

Ask a sign of the LORD your God. (v. 11)

Ahaz, king of Judah, was afraid. Two other kings had allied against him and were planning attacks on the city of Jerusalem. But God would not allow this to happen. God sent the prophet Isaiah to Ahaz to convey this message. God invited Ahaz, if he doubted Isaiah's word, to ask for a sign. But in faith, Ahaz refused. I suspect that many of us would have accepted God's invitation. How often people have said, "I'll believe, but only if God gives me a sign."

Isaiah told Ahaz that God would give him a sign, whether he wanted one or not. That sign was called "Immanuel," which means "God is with us." The sign was simply that God would be with him.

As Christians, we call Jesus "Immanuel" because in him God became human to live as one with us. Through the Holy Spirit, God is with us still. God gives us the same sign that God gave Ahaz. No booming voices from heaven, no mind-boggling miracles. God gives us something more subtle—our Savior's sustaining presence. This may not always be the sign we want. Even so, God assures us that it is the only sign we need.

Immanuel, sustain me today as you sustained me yesterday, and as you sustain me always. Amen

Prayer concern: Those struggling to believe
in God's promises

Talking about Jesus

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ. (v. 1)

Do you know someone who talks a lot? Perhaps, on occasion, you are that person. If someone else is willing to listen, most of us enjoy talking—especially about ourselves. I am not sure whether the apostle Paul was long-winded. If his letters give any indication, then he very well might have been. Today's text, which constitutes Paul's initial greetings to the Christians in Rome, appears to be one long, run-on sentence. It goes on for seven verses. However, note that Paul's greeting, as verbose as it may be, says very little about Paul. In verse 1, Paul identifies himself simply as a "servant of Jesus Christ" and an "apostle." The next five verses are all about Jesus.

Paul certainly had a lot to say, not about himself, but about his Savior. What about us? Today's text reminds us that, like Paul, we belong to Jesus Christ. How can we talk about ourselves without mentioning Jesus? We do not need to stand on street corners and preach. We need not knock on doors and try to convert all our neighbors. Yet with humble and gentle words, we can convey the love of Christ to others.

**Jesus, let all I say today
reflect your unending love. Amen**
Prayer concern: Preachers and teachers
of the gospel

Fourth Sunday in Advent

**When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel
of the Lord commanded him. (v. 24)**

God asked Joseph to do a difficult thing. God asked Joseph to believe in a miracle, and then act as though that miracle were true. No doubt, Joseph faced ridicule when he took Mary as his wife. Still, Joseph did as God commanded.

I suspect that the Gospel writer Matthew has given us a condensed version of this story, as he makes no mention of Joseph's doubts and worries. Being human, however, Joseph must have had some concern about taking Mary as his wife. In the end, however, he did as God asked. Joseph was able to act in faith because God gave him the ability to do so.

What difficult things is God asking you to do? Whatever they may be, remember the example of Joseph. And know this—God never asks us to do something without first giving us the ability to do it.

**Gracious God, help me
to step forward in faith. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those making
difficult decisions

Blessed in the present

We wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. (v. 13)

What do you do while you wait? You may pace, tap your feet, or ponder 1,000 other things you could be doing. In our fast-paced world, where the mantra is "Get it now," we have grown accustomed to "instant everything." Yet even in our fast-paced world, we still frequently find ourselves on hold, in line, or stuck in traffic.

Today's text teaches us that waiting time need not be wasted time. Paul writes about "the blessed hope" for which all Christians wait—that day when Jesus will come again. Paul also tells Titus that "the grace of God has appeared" and that we live "in the present age."

Our lives on earth are a time of waiting. We are not yet where God wants us to be. A glorious everlasting future awaits us. Still, in this time while we wait "in the present age," God abundantly blesses us. We can delight in the present even as we anticipate what the future will bring. God blesses every moment of our lives, even those times when we find ourselves waiting.

**Slow me down, Jesus, so that
I might see how blessed I am right now. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who feel impatient

St. Thomas, Apostle

How can we know the way? (v. 5)

"Don't be afraid to ask questions," said one of my teachers. "It's not a sign of ignorance. Asking questions means you want to learn."

The apostle Thomas did not fear asking questions. With the disciples gathered around him as they shared the Passover, Jesus spoke at length about profound spiritual matters. Since the disciples often did not grasp the meaning of Jesus' words, they very likely struggled to understand him on that night before his death. Perhaps some of them sat there, politely nodding their heads, pretending to understand Jesus, too proud to ask any questions. But not Thomas. "How can we know the way?" he asked.

Jesus responded with words that have inspired Christians through the ages: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Thank God for Thomas and his question!

Life is too perilous a journey to attempt without first seeking directions. God invites your questions—so ask them. Turn to God's word. Raise your questions in prayer. Gather with others who are also seeking to understand. How can any of us know the way unless we turn to Christ for the answers?

Dear Jesus, guide all who seek to know you. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are traveling this week

Sing boldly**Sing to the LORD, all the earth. (v. 1)**

I love to sing. Unfortunately, whenever I open my mouth in song, I am not sure what will come out. Sometimes I sing on key. Usually, I do not. This inconsistency causes me to feel self-conscious about singing in public. I recently had the opportunity to sing at a gathering where hundreds of talented musicians were present. During the opening hymn, I joined in softly, as I usually do, hoping that no one but God would hear me. However, so many loud and beautiful voices had come together in praise of God that I could not hear my own voice. I raised my volume a bit. Still I could not hear my own off-key croaking. My words were engulfed by the wonderful voices around me, making a beautiful noise to the Lord.

So I sang that hymn louder and louder. Soon I was singing as boldly as I have ever sung in public. Although the noise I was making was far from beautiful, I knew that I was part of something marvelous. I did not feel the least bit self-conscious, because my voice was supported by all those other voices around me. I suspect that in that moment I experienced a foretaste of what heaven will be like.

**Join my voice with all the others
who sing your praises, O God. Amen**
Prayer concern: Church musicians

The jolt of light

**The people who walked in darkness have
seen a great light. (v. 2)**

My friend recently purchased a popular device that activates electrical items by responding to sounds, such as clapping. She attached it to the lamp in her bedroom. She felt pleased that she no longer needed to climb out of bed to turn off the light. A simple *clap-clap* did the job. However, she soon discovered that when she coughed in her sleep, the noise turned the light back on. She would wake with a jolt, startled and disoriented by the sudden brightness.

The prophet Isaiah used the image of light to remind the Israelites about God's power and glory. In this Advent season, many Christians light candles as a symbol of Jesus, "the light of the world." Light comforts us. Light warms us. Light clarifies the path before us. Yet when our eyes have grown accustomed to the dark, light also can irritate or startle us. Shadows conceal. Light reveals us as we really are.

In God's light, we can no longer hide our faults and blemishes. Seeing ourselves as we are can be a jolting, unpleasant experience. Still we need not fear God's light. In the glow of Christ's love, we receive comfort. God accepts us—faults, blemishes, and all.

Shine on me, Lord Jesus. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who suffer from anxiety

Christmas Eve

**There were shepherds living in the fields,
keeping watch over their flock by night. (v. 8)**

Talk about rotten luck. Here it is, the very first Christmas, and the shepherds have to work the late shift. It appears they will miss all the excitement in Bethlehem. No problem, says God. There in the fields, where the shepherds diligently attend to their duties, angels appear with a message from God. As with Moses and Zechariah, God comes to the shepherds while they are “on the job.”

Where will you meet God this Christmas? Many of us look for God in the special moments of the season. We meet God as we gather in festively decorated churches for worship. We experience God's love in the melodies of hymns and carols. God can also meet you in the midst of your busy holiday preparations. As you bake holiday treats, wrap gifts, and run errands, know that God is always with you.

God abides in holy places and comforts us in the blessed glow of candlelight. But God also abides in the ordinary, workaday places of our lives—in offices, parking lots, day-care centers, and nursing homes. Wherever you are this Christmas, remember the shepherds and know that God is close at hand.

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are working this Christmas

Christmas Day

And the Word became flesh and lived among us. (v. 14)

Amidst the glitz and tinsel, the message of Christmas comes down to this: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." Saddened by the brokenness of our humanity, our compassionate God arrived on earth, just like us, as a helpless baby. And as it is with all of us, this infant became a child. Jesus played, learned, and grew taller, just like each of us. Like us, he cried, laughed, and even on occasion got angry.

Sometimes, like us, Jesus spent time by himself. He experienced the deep loneliness that all humans feel. Other times, he surrounded himself with friends. He feasted, celebrated, and experienced the joy of being alive. And just like us, he felt disappointment when his friends let him down. Like us, he hoped, prayed, and experienced temptation. He suffered, and he met the fate which awaits us all. Like everyone who went before him and all of us who have yet to go, he died.

Then something incredible happened. Jesus rose from the dead! And because of Jesus Christ, we too shall live forever. That is the message of Christmas.

Thank you, God, for loving this world so much. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who do not know Jesus

St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr

Lord, do not hold this sin against them. (7:60)

I read about a pastor who dropped dead while preaching a sermon. "That's not such a bad way to go," I thought. The event must have been traumatic for the congregation. Yet in the midst of tragedy, what a wonderful witness—to leave this earth speaking God's word.

Saint Stephen's death, while brutal, also served as a powerful testimony to Christ. Stephen was murdered for preaching about Jesus. His final words must have shocked those who put him to death: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

None of us knows exactly when we will leave this earth or what our final words might be. We can only hope that in death, as in life, we will bear witness to the Lord we seek to serve. Whatever our dying words might be, we can draw comfort from knowing that ultimately God, not us, will have the last word. As Stephen's life reminds us, the last word from God is all about love and mercy.

**Dear Jesus, grant me a bold faith and
courage to speak about you to everyone. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who minister with the dying

St. John, Apostle and Evangelist

**But there are also many other things
that Jesus did. (v. 25)**

Have you ever wondered about all those other things that Jesus did? As grateful as we are for the testimony of the four Gospels, most of us are curious about the unrecorded pieces of Jesus' life on earth. What was he really like as a child? What miracles did he perform that we do not know about? Could some of his unrecorded words shed light on issues we struggle with today?

The Gospel of John tells us that it is impossible to know everything about Jesus. Even so, what we do know about Jesus informs us about what we do not know about him. We know from the Gospels that Jesus was compassionate, forgiving, ever humble, and most importantly, the Son of God. We can be certain that Jesus' unrecorded words and deeds were consistent with how we know him to be. Furthermore, we know that Jesus has risen from the dead. We serve a Savior who is still alive. If we would like to know more about Jesus than is recorded in the Bible, we simply need to look around and ask, "What is Jesus doing right now, right here, among us?"

**Dear Jesus, open my eyes, that
I may see you in every moment of my life. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who are homeless

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. (v. 18)

Every year someone says, "What difference does Christmas make? The world is as bad as it's ever been." Today's text reminds us that we need not open our newspapers to read about violence. The Bible records some of humankind's most dastardly deeds. The same book that comforts us in times of trouble also reminds us that we humans have fallen short of God's intentions for us.

In many ways, the world has not changed much in 2,000 years. Jesus was born into a violent world, and violence continues to abound. We do not know why God appeared to do nothing to prevent atrocities such as the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem. We do know that God works in the midst of this world's violence. Ultimately, God has promised to bring good out of evil. One day the violence will cease. When we are tempted to doubt this, we need only look to Jesus. Jesus was a victim of unthinkable violence. If God can bring about the salvation of the world through Jesus' ugly death, then surely God can work in the midst of our tragedies. In the meantime, like Rachel, we weep. We also trust and hope.

Comfort those who mourn, O God. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who mourn the death of a child

Calling 9-1-1

**[God] sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly. (v. 15)**

While dialing the phone number of a friend, my wife accidentally called 9-1-1. "This is the police department," came the reply. My wife apologized and explained that there was no emergency. She hung up the phone.

Then, three minutes later, the doorbell rang. Two police officers greeted her when she opened the door. "You dialed 9-1-1, ma'am." Again, my wife explained that the call had been unintentional. However, the officers insisted upon coming inside the house and checking things out. They did not leave until they were certain that they were not needed. My wife's misadventure provides a spiritual lesson. Like the diligent police officers, our God responds whenever we call for help (though not always in the way we expect). Sometimes God comes knocking when we do not ask for help or when we would rather that God stay away.

As Psalm 147 reminds us, God provides for the earth and is present with us at all times, not just in emergencies. God seeks to relate with us in every moment of every day.

**Thank you, God, for providing for me
when I call out to you—and also when I don't. Amen**

Prayer concern: Emergency service workers

By our side

**Then the LORD God will wipe away the tears
from all faces. (v. 8)**

They had been married for 60 years. Now, in old age, his health had deteriorated, and she could no longer care for him at home. Every day, however, she came to visit him at the nursing home. All day she would sit and hold his hand, while he stared into space. For hours, the two of them would sit together silently. Sometimes she would stroke his forehead or wipe his cheeks with a tissue. After 60 years together, she had learned how to communicate love without speaking.

When we are hurting, we often long for a word of comfort. We long to hear from God. In times of pain, God sometimes speaks to us clearly through the Bible or the sacraments. Other times, however, it seems that God has nothing to say. We may wonder if God still loves us. Yet, many times God does not need to speak a single word. In those times, God sits with us, silently holding our hands. God comforts us and wipes the tears from our faces. Although we may not hear God's voice in those times, God never leaves us. Not for a moment. Even when we are not aware of it, God remains constantly by our side.

Thank you, God, for never leaving me. Amen
Prayer concern: Those who care for elderly
family members

New Year's Eve

[God] has made everything suitable for its time. (v. 11)

As I write these words, a young married couple in my congregation awaits the birth of their first child. Another family has gathered around the bed of their husband and father, knowing that he is about to die.

The young couple have done all that they can to prepare for their baby's arrival. They have taken birthing classes, mapped out the quickest route to the hospital, and built a nursery in their home. Now they wait, knowing that the timing of this birth is in God's hands.

The other family, gathered at the deathbed of their beloved, has also prepared for the inevitable moment. They have said, "Good-bye" and "I love you." They have hugged and wept and laughed. Now they wait, knowing that the timing of this death is in God's hands.

Birth and death, bookends of our time on earth, remind us how little control we have over life's events. As you read these words, you stand on the verge of a new year, a time of ending and beginning. God has seen you through another year and will meet you as the new year comes. Whatever has been, whatever shall be, know that your life is in God's good hands.

**Thank you, Jesus, for leading me through
all that has been and all that shall be. Amen**

Prayer concern: Peace throughout the world in 2005

Prayers

Morning

Lead me, O God, in paths of right living this day. Lead me to your children who need care and comfort, and help me to share from your bounty. Lead me to your children longing for guidance and love, and help me to share your life-giving word. Lead me to my neighbors near and far, and help me to share your peace and your hope. In Jesus' name. Amen

Evening

Merciful Lord, I lift my voice to you this night with thanks for another day. With loving forgiveness, lift the burdens of sin and doubt from my heart, that I may rest secure in your promise and hope. Be with me and keep me as your own, now and forever. In Jesus' name. Amen

A word from Martin Luther

Those who believe in another life after this life see that the services of kings and governors are necessary for them in this life, but that they need Christ the King for another and eternal life.

—Martin Luther

Luther's Works, vol. 12, p. 42

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